

# Game Narrative Review

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**Your name (one name, please):** Sierra Clark  
**Your school:** Southern Methodist University Guildhall  
**Your email:** sierrac@smu.edu  
**Month/Year you submitted this review:** January, 2020

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**Game Title:** *The White Door*  
**Platform:** PC/iOS/Android  
**Genre:** Puzzle  
**Release Date:** January 9<sup>th</sup>, 2020  
**Developer:** Rusty Lake  
**Publisher:** Second Maze Studios  
**Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer:** Robin & Maarten (last names not provided)

## Overview

*The White Door* is the most recent installment in the *Rusty Lake* universe, a narrative universe that the Rusty Lake developer has been exploring through their compelling *Cube Escape* series. In this installment the player is introduced to a new character, Robert Hill, and must help him resolve his memories of a painful past while simultaneously aiding him in getting out of The White Door Mental Health facility.

Like all games in the Rusty Lake universe, *The White Door* involves surrealistic, vaguely unsettling imagery including the appearance of many characters that have been recurring throughout the series. As the player navigates Robert's strictly regimented days in the mental health facility, they equally explore his dreams – windows to Robert's past and his reason for being in the facility. After becoming a corrupted soul through these experiments, The White Door Mental Health facility ends up questionably helping Robert by the end of the game. As color returns to a formerly monochromatic world in the final chapter of the game, the player is left uncertain through the use of multiple endings whether 'The Woman' will continue to haunt and plague him or whether he's recovered.

## Characters

- **Robert Hill** – The player character, Robert Hill once worked at Johnsson Bird Food. After being left by his girlfriend, The Woman, Robert is fired from his job. Some time later, he sees a news story about The Woman being murdered, triggering a downward spiral culminating in his institutionalization in a mental health facility. Exposure to these memories through experimental dream therapy later causes his soul to become corrupted, however he is the first character in the series to return from this state to living person. He's shown to have both self-destructive tendencies and suicidal impulses.

- **The Nurse** – The Nurse is the woman who performs daily checkups on Robert Hill. She is responsible for determining Robert's compliance with The White Door facility's program, and records his answers to quizzes provided to keep his mind and memory sharp. As a member of The White Door facility's staff, she was involved in the dream experiments that ultimately corrupt Robert's soul.
- **The Manager** – The Manager is the person responsible for how The White Door facility operates. Very little is known about him, however he participates in Robert's induction into The White Door facility's program. Due to his appearance in Robert's surreal dreams, it's fair to assume he also played an active role in the dream therapy. Through email correspondence in the game, it becomes clear The Manager has special plans for Robert, who is a valuable test subject due to his exposure to The Woman.
- **The Woman** – A recurring character from almost every other game in the Rusty Lake universe, returning players will not only recognize this character on sight but also associate her with death, mental illness, and corrupted souls. Robert's exposure to her is the reason he was targeted by The White Door facility, and it's his memories related to her that cause his depression to spiral, and eventually corrupt his soul.
- **Sarah White** – A doctor on The White Door facility's staff, Sarah White is the only other character the player ever controls. Her intentions are largely unknown, as are her opinions of what's happening at The White Door facility. However, in an alternate ending to the game she is shown to erase Robert's memories of The Woman, presumably freeing him from the possibility of becoming corrupted again. This goes directly against written instructions from The Manager to the staff, so it's possible she had a change of heart and became Robert's ally during the course of his treatment.
- **Mr. Deer** – Recurring character from previous games, no spoken lines.
- **The Bartender** – Recurring character from previous games. Gives Robert the gun he uses to shoot himself in a dream.

## Breakdown

*The White Door* is an interesting, standout member of the Rusty Lake universe by virtue of being the first Rusty Lake game created in collaboration with an outside team – Second Maze Studios. This collaboration led not only to a gameplay style totally unique from previous games, but also impacted the story that was actually told throughout the game. *The White Door* forms into a one-of-a-kind narrative through its compliance with the pre-existing Rusty Lake universe games, its carefully planned defiance of pre-existing Rusty Lake canon, and its reliance on and later subversion of player expectations of the Rusty Lake universe.

Starting in April of 2015 and consisting of no less than 15 games (at time of writing), the narrative designer of *The White Door* had their work cut out for them to create a game that fit in the Rusty Lake universe without contradicting pre-established lore. Creating a game that was obviously a member of the universe was as simple as incorporating imagery and recurring characters the player would recognize – The Woman, Mr. Deer, The Bartender, and more. However, each of these characters came with their own lore baggage, especially in conjunction with setting imagery (one of the dreams seems to take place in a different Rusty Lake game entirely: *Cube Escape Theatre*). By creating an independent story where these characters are seen but not active participants in the waking world plot, the writer of *The White Door* was able to remain consistent with previous games while still giving themselves room to stretch. Although we can expect a certain amount of literal interpretation of surreal events within Rusty Lake games, by virtue of having nearly all of the series' recurring characters appear only in dreams the writer quite cleverly side-stepped lore conflict by leaving it ambiguous whether the

information the player was being given was actually true or merely a delusion of Robert Hill's strained mind.

Although the writer did an excellent job of removing themselves from lore culpability, the moments where they intervened to deliberately defy pre-established canon form unique narrative beats that catch the player's attention and shake them out of the daze of routine gameplay. The best example of this is the dream Robert has on Day 4 (essentially level 4) of the game. Until this point, The Woman and the Johnsson's Bird Food brand were the only connective elements between *The White Door* and previous Rusty Lake games, but in this dream Robert is seemingly placed directly in the action of a different game: *Cube Escape Theatre*. Not only is the setting the same, The Bartender actually delivers lines from *Theatre's* script. However, rather than The Bartender, the player *knows* the person who gave the Bloody Mary to Robert was not The Bartender but Dale Vandermeer, the player character from the majority of the other Rusty Lake games. This creates a moment of slap-in-the-face dissonance for players who have been following the Rusty Lake series, causing them to suddenly start paying much closer attention in expectation of an explanation or lore reveal. This shock to the player's system was artfully timed – by happening on Day 4, it's very close to the dead center of the game and snaps the player out of the routine of solving puzzles just for the sake of progression that they may have fallen into.

The final artfully executed element of *The White Door's* narrative is its interplay with and subversions of players' expectations of the Rusty Lake universe. Throughout the series, the looming threat in the background has always been Rusty Lake Mental Health & Fishing, an in-game organization with ties to alchemy, rebirth, immortality, soul corruption, the lake, and the ever-mysterious cubes. Over the course of the series, the player has come to have a very wary feeling about this organization, as anyone associated with it throughout the series is either in the organization, dead, or both. For this reason, as soon as the setting of a mental health facility was revealed, players anticipated that Robert Hill was within the Rusty Lake Mental Health & Fishing facility, until it was later revealed the name of the facility was, in fact, The White Door. However, despite the difference of name, the average player remains wary based solely on the similarity of 'mental health institution.' However, by the end of the game the methods practiced on Robert at The White Door facility seem to ultimately save Robert's soul - as the monochrome life Robert has been living in the waking world transitions back to color and he embraces and absorbs his own lost soul. This happy ending serves as a unique twist to players of the series, and provides a shocking realization that these players have become just as paranoid and biased against this type of facility as the characters themselves.

*The White Door* is the latest member of the Rusty Lake universe, and provides a fresh taste of that universe from a new, previously unexplored perspective that sets it apart from earlier members of the franchise. Its narrative is creatively and expertly executed, and stands out as impactful for its ability to artfully match and then defy pre-established canon as well as uniquely surprising longtime players of the series by subverting associations the game series itself has established in their minds.

## Strongest Element

The strongest element of *The White Door's* narrative is its ability to reference preexisting canon while telling a fully independent story that doesn't completely alienate onboarding players. It achieves this through its repetition of the series' iconic imagery, characters, and actions, but recontextualizing them in a fresh perspective. This culminates in a narrative that simultaneously gives these things new meaning without contradicting preestablished events and characters by leaning into the series' surrealism and the unreliability of dreams. It gives the game a unique narrative flavor that makes it stand out to players both new and familiar, as every event in the game gains new significance based on the player's knowledge of the

overarching narrative and themes - a new player will have a different experience than a somewhat familiar player will have a different experience than a fully-versed.

## Unsuccessful Element

The weakest element of *The White Door's* narrative actually is the perfect consequence of its strongest element - by keeping itself viable for onboarding players, the game actually fails to make a narrative impact in the overarching plot of the series. Although The Woman appears, we're no closer to solving her mystery. Although a sequence from *Cube Escape Theatre* is present, it doesn't provide meaningful insight into the remaining questions the overarching series left us with its previous installment - *Cube Escape Paradox*. It leaves the game intriguing on its own, but makes it less impactful overall by reducing the game's significance in relation to larger series conflicts and narrative beats.

## Highlight

The narrative highlight of *The White Door* happens with the turning point near the end of the story. After enduring this terrible experimentation, a string of pseudo-real nightmares, and becoming fully corrupted, one morning Robert wakes to find slivers of color re-entering his life. This serves as a magical moment for the player, as up until now the waking world was fully monochromatic. By following the routine of the mental health facility one more time, Robert is able to fully return color to his experience sliver by sliver, and is ultimately able to reconcile willingly with his own estranged soul.

## Critical Reception

Receiving a 77% from PC Gamer, a 9/10 from Steam, and a 4.5/5 on the Google Play store, *The White Door* seems to have pleased players more than professional reviewers. After reading the PC Gamer review, it's possible a contributing factor in the reviewer's opinion was their unfamiliarity with the franchise as a whole. Public reviews on Steam and Google Play tend to demonstrate a congruent trend - players who had experience with the Rusty Lake franchise were right at home, while some of the more esoteric or surreal puzzles stumped some first-time players. However, despite users experiencing varying levels of difficulty reviews across the board complement *The White Door* for its narrative.

## Lessons

- Rely on player lore base to connect linked stories
  - Franchise players needed no more than a single reference to the Rusty Lake universe to immediately know the game was connected to the ongoing franchise, despite the unrelated title.
  - Players will feel knowledgeable and accomplished for noticing 'easter eggs' of connectivity between linked installments.
- Subtlety in connection can make a series installment more marketable to a new audience

- Although the game makes significantly more sense and means more to the player if they're familiar with the series, *The White Door* can be played as a stand-alone game. It accomplishes this by having only visual references to previous games, never having the character dynamically interact with any character who may know more than the player.
- A series can create its own set of rules and affordances
  - After a full franchise of a mental health facility being the looming antagonist in the background, players immediately intuited bad intentions for The White Door facility's actions.
- Breaking those affordances can make for unique and jolting narrative beats
  - After seeing Robert become corrupted, the player loses all hope of his recovery. Him managing to return to himself via The White Door facility's methods was a well-executed twist that makes players sharply aware of the assumptions the series has taught them to make.

## Summation

*The White Door* is the latest installment in the Rusty Lake universe, developed by Rusty Lake and published by Second Maze Studios. By meticulously weaving pre-existing lore into a freestanding narrative in ways that will be meaningful to the returning player but unthreatening to the onboarding player, *The White Door* uniquely connects new and old fans with an experience and ending that took new and old fans by surprise, subverting earlier assumptions of the series.

### References:

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